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The CIA's Tar Heel training camp

ELIZABETH CITY, N.C. — Only the frogs' croaking and the crickets' chirping break the absolute silence on remote, seldom traveled State Road 1336 in North Carolina's sparsely populated coastal lowlands.

But the tranquility of the autumn afternoon is interrupted by a loud explosion at Harvey Point, an isolated promontory 18 miles southwest of Elizabeth City.

"Window-rattling explosions thunder in the early morning hours. Flares sometimes brighten the night skies," one area newspaper reported a decade ago. "Civilian and military buses, some with their windows blacked out, roll down the country road to Harvey Point."

Single- and twin-engine light aircraft, helicopters and sometimes even big military transports fly into a private airstrip at Harvey Point. Other planes cannot even come close, because the Federal Aviation Administration has placed the airspace above Harvey Point off limits to virtually all flights.

What is going on at Harvey Point? Why have those explosions occurred regularly for more than a quarter of a century? What transpires behind the chain link fence topped with barbed wire that surrounds the 1,200-acre site?

Only a few clues are available at the end of the lonely road. A red, white and blue mailbox has "US GWMT" stencilled on it. A nondescript guardhouse is flanked by a weatherbeaten sign that proclaims the facility to be the "Harvey Point Defense Testing Activity."

In fact, Harvey Point is a clandestine Central Intelligence Agency base used by the CIA to conduct advanced paramilitary training, with special emphasis placed on the handling of explosives and munitions.

The CIA's main base for providing paramilitary training to its own operatives, contract employees and intelligence agents from friendly foreign nations is the equally secret but far larger (10,500 acres) Camp Peary in Williamsburg, Va. The training there covers specialties ranging from parachute and night air operations to infiltration and exfiltration techniques.

But the CIA is uneasy about using munitions and explosives in that increasingly urbanized area. Indeed, two popular tourist attractions visited by millions of people every year — Colonial Williamsburg and Busch Gardens — are within a few miles of Camp Peary.

Thus, the CIA has used Harvey Point as the equivalent of a "graduate school" where powerful explosives and heavy weapons can be used in a more rural setting. "If you were going into paramilitary operations, you went to Harvey Point after Camp Peary," says former CIA contract employee Joe Maggio.

One of the few official (albeit indirect) acknowledgments of Harvey Point's mission came during the 1970s, in the report of a federal government commission established to examine the work of the CIA. It referred to "an isolated agency facility in North Carolina" that provided "a capability for detecting, handling and disarming all types of explosive devices."

Much of that work appears to involve cars and trucks. "They come in whole and they go out all blowed up — all tore apart," says one local resident who watches the daily flow of traffic to and from Harvey Point.

Indeed, as he speaks a large flatbed truck rumbles down the road, carrying a jeep, a sedan with Navy markings and what appears to be a portable power generator toward the CIA base.

Those familiar with the activities at Harvey Point say the training there covers not only defensive countermeasures but also offensive sabotage.

In other words, car bombs and car bombing are not confined to overzealous Irish nationalists, fanatic Muslim extremists and their ilk. Amid the loblolly pines of Harvey Point, people are being trained in this country to perform the same violent acts.

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